

3-cent pieces: Historically gone with the wind

By Roger Boye

Here are the answers to some questions from Tribune readers.

Q—While checking a price catalogue, I noticed that years ago Uncle Sam made two types of 3-cent pieces, one in silver and the other in nickel. Why did the country need two versions of an odd-denomination coin?

A—Bureaucrats introduced the silver 3-cent piece in 1851, primarily for use in buying postage stamps. The “threes” disappeared from circulation during the Civil War when people hoarded coins of all denominations.

At war's end in 1865, Treasury chiefs began making the nickel specimen because they reasoned that a 3-cent piece of low intrinsic value would circulate better than a silver coin. But during the 1870s and 1880s, even nickel “threes” fell into disuse, prompting officials to quit production in late 1889.

Q—A bank teller gave us three \$1 bills, each with back sides printed very faintly. Have we hit the jackpot? All are in brand-new condition.

A—The less ink on a \$1 Federal Reserve note, the greater its value in the hobby market. Bills like yours might retail for as much as \$30 each, while specimens with blank reverse sides fetch more than \$250 a dollar in uncirculated condition, according to a hobby guidebook.

Q—On the tails side of my 1946-S cent, under the words “One Cent,” is an outline of the bust of Abraham Lincoln that conforms to the bust on the heads side. What information can you give me about it?

A—Most likely, a prankster created the extra design by placing your coin against another coin in a vise. As the pressure increased, part of the design from the heads side of the second piece impressed into your coin.

It's possible, of course, that the duo Lincoln results from a government-made minting error known to experts as a “brokerage strike.” Such coins exhibit an enlarged and distorted second image while the fakes made in a vise have a normal-size image with sharp edges.

You might show your piece to a couple of dealers for expert evaluations.

Q—I have written to you three times asking that you tell me in your column what an 1871 Canadian 5-cent coin of Queen Victoria is worth. Why haven't you printed the answer?

A—Readers who want appraisals of specific foreign coins should include a self-addressed, stamped envelope with their queries. I reserve space in the column for questions of the widest possible general interest, usually on U.S. coins and currency.

By the way, the piece you describe retails for about \$8 if in “very good condition.”